Org. Growers

National Agricultural Workers Union
AFL-CIO

August 10, 1958

Re: Org. labor soc. system

Labor's back yard

Over twenty years ago the Associated Farmers of California declared publicly: "Agricultural employers pledge their resources to protect every agricultural worker in his right to work".

In June 1958, the Associated Farmers circulated among their members the following statement: "The Right to Work measure has now definitely qualified for the November ballot. As you know the passage of such a measure has been the Number 1 objective of this Association since its inception".

Here are the grass roots of Rock-and-Rule proposition number 18, which is now loaded, pointed and triggered for all trade-unionism in California. In 1958 the corporation farm interests, speaking through the Associated Farmers and operating in close order with nearly 60 growers associations that employ alien farm labor, are confident. Since 1934 they have been practicing succesfully a typical "right to work" system on the state's agricultural labor force. Two decades of such practice has, they believe, given them the Know-How. Senator Knowland's Candidacy and the McClellen Committee have given them, they hope, the Know-When.

In the mid 1930's organized labor did not challenge the claim staked out by the Associated Farmers in their ringing manifesto. The "right to work of every agricultural worker" drew a circle within the ranks of labor. Inside that circle industrial labor went on to organize, for collective bargaining, the union shop and welfare benefits. Outside the circle the fate of 200,000 wage workers on the farms was left to the discretion of gentlemen bankers and gentlemen farmers. These workers represented the left-overs of our economy and our society. Their only importance lay in that they helped to feed half the nation.

Business agriculture thus fenced off a reservation for migrant nomads. This reservation became also the base for corporation farming's long-range attack on all of labor. The family farmer gave way to the Agri-Businessman - the executive who spends his mornings pushing buttons on a desk instead of squeezing teats on a cow. His college degree is a Master's in Vertical Integration, the Up-to-Down financial backbone of economic control and political command.

It is abundantly clear that the solemn promise made by the Associated Farmers to the farm laborers has been successfully carried out. The score is a near shut-out: no collective bargaining, very limited social security, no unemployment insurance, no minimum wage, no seniority, no industrial elections. It is an example of how labor can be "integrated" into industrial management.

The system has a doctrine, formulated in a congressional document by Mr. Richard M. Nixon. The doctrine is this: it is contrary to the national welfare to extend to farm labor the rights and protection now enjoyed by the rest of organized labor.

As the farm workers have been steadily integrated into the agricultural industry so has government. The State Farm Placement Service has been housebroken to the necessities of corporation farming. The Service, supposedly an agency to bring farm workers and farm jobs together, has become a chainstore system for peddling frozen wages and counterfeit labor shortages.

Under such free wheeling conditions improvements of a "Right to Work" structure are always possible. One of these has been the introduction of the Mexican bracero program, developed on a large scale in California since 1950. The Associated Farmers

decided that it was the right of domestic farm laborers to be displaced by alien contract workers.

This has been the outstanding characteristic of the farm labor market in California for nearly a decade. By 1957 nearly 60 growers associations had been organized exclusively to hire Mexican braceros, of whom more than 170,000 were brought into the state last year. As a result, farm wages have been frozen or cut, domestic workers have been turned out of jobs, and families have been evicted to make way for alien contract labor crews.

The importation of Mexican braceros on a mass scale is the crowning achievement of the "Right to Work" system in agriculture. It has given corporation farming, served by benevolent public agencies, the chance to create an indentured labor system side by side with free trade-unions.

Under that system, a bracero with a grievance must take it up first with his boss. This is a government directive given to all braceros. Mexican Nationals may not strike because some growers associations have ruled that strikes are forbidden by law. The workers may elect representatives but they cannot hold elections. The wages fixed by public authority are the lowest the alien traffic will bear, and these wages in turn must be offered to the domestic worker.

The shop stewards are government agents who may be, and often are, supplanted by the field agents of the growers' associations, the associations investigate and settle complaints by workers. Grievance procedures are not changed by the Federal Government without consultation with the employers, though never with unions or the workers. Employers who are found in violation of the labor contract are given time "to straighten things out". The payment of bribes for the chance to work is officially, if confidentially, recognized. A growers' association may succesfully challenge the Secretary of Labor's authority to determine prevailing wages. And a bracero who presses a legitimate claim too insistently, may be beaten, kidnapped and deported by force by a Federal officials. All this has happened.

This system of labor, now flourishing in California, has been fruitfully grafted on the trunk of the Associated Farmer's "Right to Work" system, now more than twenty years old.

The solid branches of this system are the growers associations which recruit, hire, distribute, supervise and police hundreds of thousands of braceros. These associations are run by Agri-Business, and they trail behind them thousands of small growers who use the cheap labor it provides. The associations collectively handle payroll accounts running into multi millions. They levy fees, assessments and service charges which enable them to finance a growing bureaucracy. They collect a toll on private insurance. They nourish a widespread commissary racket.

Sprawled throughout California, these alien labor associations are cross-tied to the Associated Farmer. They have a philosophy which commends them to industrial interests: "to prevent unreasonable discrimination against any person or persons by any combination of persons in any matter relating to the business of the organization".

And they offer a formidable and well-heeled machine suitable for various purposes.

Thus they were a natural platform from which William Knowland launched his political rocket in 1957. The rural counties, where agricultural "Right to Work" techniques have been perfected, became the chosen ground for "backyard campaigning" against all labor. Growers who were profiting from the exploitation of Mexican braceros financed the Yuba County "Right to Work" ordinance. The Board of Directors of the Associated Farmers, in January 1958, promised to deliver 100,000 signatures on "Right to Work" petitions. The California Farm Bureau Federation mobilized its

60,000 members against "labor monopoly, coercion, intimidation and interference with the rights of others". The Farm Bureau members are the largest users of Mexican Nationals.

The strategy worked. The county ordinances kept the issue on the front pages of the press for months. Thousands of signatures were rolled up as a backlog for the big push in the cities later on. The ringing of cowbells, among which Proposition 18 was born in rural California, was proclaimed by the hucksters as the pealing of labor's new liberty bell. Rank and file trade-unionists were shocked by the tone of the attack and the targets at which it was aimed. Among the "crimes" of unionism which had been succesfully resisted in agriculture, and which were soon to be stamped out in industry, listed in one rural editorial, were the payment of dues, picketing, boycotts and seniority.

Unemployed union men, forced to look for temporary work in the fields by the current depression, are finding that the Department of Labor considers 50 cents an hour a decent minimum wage in agriculture. Caterpillar operators who have carried cards in the Operating Engineers Union and earned $2.50 an hour under a union contract, are privileged to drive the same "cat" for $1.00 an hour for a "Right to Work" corporation farm. Construction workers laid off in the cities, still carrying their union buttons on their caps, line up on skid row to compete for wages of 85 and 90 cents an hour.

This is the lesson the workers of California are learning the hard way. The attack on all labor was patiently blue printed, forged, assembled and wired in its own back yard. William Knowland's running start was made in "Right to Work" rural California. He is headed where he came from - the vertical integration of industrial labor of 1982 patterned on the vertical integration of rural labor of 1942.

California's industrial workers, rightly enough, consider this 1958 campaign as a major crisis. For it is revealing, not simply the opportunistic tactics of the men who have capitalized the revelations of the McClellan Committee, but the long-term strategy of forces rooted in the profits of industrial farming.

Those who have created the strategy have a solid base, which they hope to keep intact after November, if they should suffer a temporary setback at the polls. They have the inner lines of communication in the state bureaucracy through the Farm Placement Service. They have a network of federally subsidized growers associations, whose prosperity has helped to finance "Right to Work" propaganda.

And they have above all, a precious asset; the knowledge that trade-unionism in California, under certain conditions, will offer only token opposition while its most solemn pledges on human decency and democracy are denied one large segment of the brotherhood of labor.

That portion of the working people who are thus cut off and delivered to vertical integration, "Right to Work" style, will always be used as the base from which the Associated Farmers and their industrial patrons will re-form the attack on all organized labor.

If democracy, freedom of organization and collective bargaining are principles, they apply to all. The struggle to realize them must be pressed into every corner of the land, their enjoyment denied no worker, however destitute or ignorant he may be.

Otherwise labor's long, bitter and often tragic commitment to humanity becomes a game of odd-man out. The odd man must always be the low one on the totem pole. Once the Right to Workmen have laid the axe to the base, surprised and pleased that the upper totems do not come to life, no trade-unionist need ask: "For whom does the axe fall?" It falls for him.

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